

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY  
LECTURE 8: ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM

"An example must be demonstrated:

1. Hang (and make sure that the hanging takes place *in full view of the people*) *no fewer than one hundred* known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers.
2. Publish the names.
3. Seize *all* their grain from them.
4. Designate hostages in accordance with yesterday's telegram. Do it in such a fashion that for hundreds of kilometers around the people might see, tremble, shout: *they are strangling* and will strangle to death the bloodsucking kulaks."  
—Lenin, orders to Bolsheviks in Penza province, August 1918

"He owed much of his early success to underestimation by his colleagues."  
—Bernard Wasserstein, on Stalin

1. TO THE LENIN MAUSOLEUM: THE MUMMY'S TOMB

Western liberalism emphasizes pluralism: the representation and accommodation of diverse points of view. Lenin was never willing to share power, or to alternate in power with other political parties. To be sure, there were diverse points of view within the Bolshevik party, but Lenin would not tolerate them. He ridiculed dissenters and eventually banned them. Leninism stood for the monopoly of power, intransigence, and ruthlessness in the service of the Party's historic mission. This is not to say that Lenin did not change his mind, or that he did not seek advice from different sources. But in principle Leninism implies a single correct course of action, defined by the Party. And this basic principle made possible the rise of Stalin, who took advantage not only of the ideology Lenin created and the institutions he bequeathed, but even of Lenin's dead body. When Lenin died prematurely after a series of strokes, Stalin arranged for the great man's body to be mummified. Leninism became a cult, with Stalin as its chief priest.

But even before Stalin rose to power, what Leninism amounted to in practice was a party-state that progressively absorbed all the principal forms of social and economic life. In his book *State and Revolution*, Lenin announced: "to organize the *whole* national economy on the lines of the postal service... all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat—this is our immediate aim." A whole society organized along the lines of the postal service hardly seems an attractive vision to us! In any case, for Lenin the "armed proletariat" and the Party were identical: that equation, false as it was, is the essence of Leninism. The Party monitored the "soviet" bureaucracy from behind the scenes: "soviet" power was a façade for a centrally controlled party that pulled all the strings. This was not at all what most revolutionary workers and peasants had in mind when they acquiesced in the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917.

## 2. FROM REVOLUTION TO CIVIL WAR

As we have seen, the Provisional Government that formed in February/March 1917 quickly forfeited popular support because it persisted in fighting the war and because its reforms fell behind the rising expectations of hungry city crowds and landless peasants. Lenin, on the other hand, promised "peace, bread, and land," and "all power to the soviets." Peace Lenin provided by signing the harsh Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans in March 1918. The Treaty detached eastern Poland, the Ukraine, Finland, and the Baltic provinces from Russia, but Lenin assured his followers that the spread of revolution across Europe would soon make the Treaty obsolete. Lenin delivered on the promise of land for the peasants by acknowledging the land seizures that had taken place since March 1917. A decree of 26 October 1917 abolished all private land ownership without compensation, and called on rural land committees to redistribute the land to the peasants on an egalitarian basis. Another popular decree, in November, gave elected factory committees the power of supervision over industrial and commercial enterprises. But bread was harder to provide, and by January 1918 Lenin was suggesting that the Petrograd Soviet should send out armed detachments to find and confiscate grain, and that they should be empowered to shoot those who resisted.

Could the new regime, under better circumstances, have developed a genuine "people's democracy" on the bases of soviets, and committees of workers and soldiers and peasants? Probably not. In any case, "whatever may have been the Bolsheviks' intentions when they came to power, there can be no doubt that during the civil war they withdrew or nullified most of the benefits they had given to the people in October, while submitting the democratic institutions they had helped to create to rigid and often brutal control from above" (Geoffrey Hosking). Even before the civil war, on 2 December 1917 a Supreme Council of the National Economy was set up "to elaborate general norms and a plan for regulating the economic life of the country" as well as to "reconcile and coordinate" the activities of other economic agencies, among them the trade unions and factory committees. Here already was a recipe for total control of the economy from the center and from above.

On 7 December the Cheka was organized to combat looting, profiteering, and hoarding and to keep watch on opponents of the regime. As we have seen, it soon proceeded from mere investigation of counterrevolutionary crime to the arrest of suspects, and from there to staging trials and carrying out executions. Soon it became unnecessary for an actual crime to be proven against any person of non-worker or non-peasant origin. One Cheka official instructed his officers in November 1918: "We are not waging war against individual persons. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. During the investigation, do not look for evidence that the accused acted in deed or word against soviet power. The first questions that you ought to put are: To what class does he belong? What is his origin? What is his education or profession? And it is these questions that ought to determine the fate of the accused. In this lies the significance and essence of the Red Terror."

Here again there are echoes of the great French Revolution with its Law of Suspects and its positive evaluation of "terror" as a weapon against the people's enemies. By mid-1921 the Cheka was over a quarter of a million strong. By the following year it was operating a network of camps with 60,000 inmates, and there had been something like 150,000 executions. During the first years of Soviet power, the regime succeeded in physically destroying or driving out of the country the greater part of the "bourgeois intelligentsia," the professionals and experts who form the managerial core of a modern economy.

The Cheka had mushroomed in size during a period of civil war. The Whites were remnants of the Tsar's army who began to attack the Bolshevik regime in the summer of 1918. The Germans made mischief for the Bolsheviks by supporting a conservative Cossack government on the periphery of the country where the Whites could organize. A country torn by civil war served German interests in 1918. In the following year the Western Allies intervened on behalf of the Whites, sending aid and detachments to White forces in the far east and north of the country. Western intervention enabled the Bolsheviks to believe that they were fighting not just against domestic enemies but also against the combined forces of world imperialism.

The Reds won because (1) they controlled the center of the country, and had the advantage of interior lines of communication; (2) because they had, in Trotsky, a commander and organizer of genius; (3) because the peasants distrusted the Whites, their former landlords, even more than they distrusted the Bolsheviks; and (4) because insofar as the Whites had an ideology, it was Russian nationalism, which offended the minorities on the periphery of the country. Moreover, (5) the Allies' support was insufficient to make a decisive difference, but enough to open the Whites to the charge of being unpatriotic and encouraging foreigners to intervene in Russian affairs.

The civil war brought enormous suffering in its wake. Millions died from bullets, famine, and epidemic—far more than in the First World War. Five million died in the famine of 1921, and some scholars estimate the "excess mortality" of the period as high as fourteen million. By 1921 industrial production was at about a fifth of its 1913 level, and money had almost disappeared, replaced by a primitive barter economy. Food production declined as well, and the trading and transport systems necessary to deliver grain to the cities had broken down. Between 1917 and late 1920 the number of factory workers in Russia declined from around 3.5 million to barely over a million, and the populations of the great cities plunged. Some observers joked bitterly that far from creating a "dictatorship of the proletariat" the regime had created a dictatorship without a proletariat.

But if the proletariat had withered, the upper echelons of Russian society had nearly disappeared. And into the void stepped the cadres of the rapidly expanding Party. From 115,000 members in January 1918, the Party grew to 775,000 in March 1921, a sixfold increase in three years. The Party was becoming an organization of the upwardly mobile, an employment agency for the newly literate. And Stalin, as the Party's General Secretary, would control its

patronage, an enormous source of influence and power in the years after Lenin's death.

### 3. KRONSTADT

The Reds won their civil war, but they lost the allegiance of a good part of what was left of the working class. In 1921 strikes broke out in Moscow and Petrograd: workers called for free trade in grain and the abolition of the privileges and extra rations enjoyed by Party officials. Their political demands reflected the influence of the semi-legal Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, who were calling for freedom of speech, press, and assembly, and the restoration of free elections to factory committees, trade unions, and soviets. The Party declared martial law in Petrograd, but meanwhile the unrest spread to the nearby naval base of Kronstadt, whose sailors had a revolutionary tradition dating back to 1905. Now they too were calling for new and secret elections, and for soviets without Bolsheviks. The uprising, crushed by Trotsky, took place while the Tenth Party Congress was in session. Lenin made economic concessions—the beginning of his New Economic Policy—but cracked down on political dissent within the Party itself. A resolution on party unity banned "factionalism": "The Congress orders the immediate dissolution, without exception, of all groups that have been formed on the basis of some platform or other, and instructs all organizations to be very strict in ensuring that no manifestation of factionalism of any sort be tolerated. Failure to comply with this resolution is to entail unconditional and immediate expulsion from the party."

Here was a major turning point: the regime had violently repressed its own principal base of supporters, who were calling for a measure of democratic control. And the Party, having already long ago eliminated competition with other political parties, now abandoned disagreement within its own ranks. It was a moment of disillusionment—perhaps not the first, and certainly not the last.

### 4. STALIN AND NON-CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

We have said little about him so far, for the very good reason that he played a minor part in the Revolution. Insecurity about his role in those heroic times is certainly one of the factors that led him eventually to murder so many of Lenin's principal lieutenants. His military record during the civil war was full of blunders. He longed to be a hero, like Lenin, but his own record in the time of revolution and war was far from impressive. One of the most brilliant Bolsheviks, Bukharin, understood that Stalin was psychologically driven to feel enviously vengeful toward all who surpassed him in qualities or capacities in which he considered himself to be pre-eminent. His hero-image of himself was in symbiosis with his villain-image of his enemies. Yet this extraordinarily vindictive and cruel man liked to present himself as a benign father-uncle.

His father was an alcoholic village cobbler in Georgia and his mother was a pious woman who placed her rebellious son in a seminary where he soon began to study Marxist rather than religious texts. But the religious training left its stamp on him: "anyone reading his [later] speeches and writings will notice their

catechistic structure, the use of question and answer, the reduction of complex questions to a set of simplified formulas, the quoting of texts to support his arguments" (Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives*).

One of Stalin's biographers, Robert Tucker, suggests that "the ideology he adopted [Marxism] legitimized his resentment against the various forms of established authority, identified his enemies as history's, bestowed higher meaning on his urge to live a life of combat, and sanctified his quest for vindictive triumphs." Aggression and vindictiveness are certainly among the principal traits of his character. He never forgot a slight or forgave the condescension of the intellectuals among his colleagues in the Bolshevik elite.

His many prison experiences were not exactly character-enhancing either. After leaving the seminary in 1899, Stalin spent the next ten years working in the Caucasus as a local agitator and organizer, with interruptions when he was sent to prison or Siberia. He was arrested seven times and escaped five times; of the nine years between March 1908 and March 1917 he spent only a year and a half out of prison. Lenin's proposals appealed to Stalin not only because of their radicalism but because they assigned a leading role to committed, full-time revolutionary agitators and organizers as the "vanguard of the proletariat." Stalin appealed to Lenin because of his "working class" background and his reputation for efficient and dedicated service to the revolutionary cause.

Nevertheless it was Leon Trotsky, not Stalin, who took the lead in organizing the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, the key to the Bolshevik seizure of power in October. Stalin was on the sidelines when the decisive events took place. "His failure to play a leading role [in 1917] inflicted a deep and lasting trauma. Hence Stalin's psychological need to match Lenin's revolution with his own... The qualities Lenin possessed that most impressed Stalin were his single-mindedness and power of concentration; his ability to see and seize an opportunity, then bend everything, including his mistakes, to his purpose; his ruthlessness based on unshakeable confidence that he was right, and with this, the will to succeed, the determination not to be beaten" (Bullock).

In 1917, Stalin was Lenin's special assistant for delicate assignments requiring conspiratorial skills, and for jobs that no one else wanted. He also became a specialist on the question of "nationalities" in what would become the "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." Kronstadt made it clear that the very "masses" who were supposed to be the principal supporters of the regime were in fact hostile to it. It is very significant that it was this period that saw the rise of Stalin. For he was a master of both the carrot and the stick: jobs for the upwardly mobile and loyal, repression (or worse) for dissidents and rivals. It was Stalin who took on the difficult task of modernizing a country where the proletariat had been depleted and disenchanting, and specialists were distrusted as class enemies. He promoted thousands of mediocre men from the provinces who owed their careers to him and sided with him against more talented figures such as Trotsky and Bukharin.

The great historian and biographer Alan Bullock sums up the differences in the leadership and oratorical styles of Stalin and Hitler as follows: "There is a striking contrast in temperament and style between the two men: the flamboyant Hitler, displaying a lack of restraint and extravagance of speech which for long made it difficult for many to take him seriously, in contrast to the reserved Stalin, who owed his rise to power to his success, not in exploiting, but in concealing his personality, and was underestimated for the opposite reason—because many failed to recognize his ambition and ruthlessness."

Stalin had emerged from the civil war with little glory and much power; Trotsky finished with much glory and little power. Stalin, half-gangster, half-bureaucrat, would use power to trump glory: he offered the Bolsheviks non-charismatic leadership, although he continually invoked the sacred authority of the safely mummified Lenin in its support.

#### 5. AFTER LENIN: "SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY"

"Unlike Hitler, whose unique position as Führer was openly accepted by all the members of the Nazi Party as the linchpin which held them together, Stalin had to conceal his ambition and at the same time find means of defeating any rivals in an unremitting but covert struggle for power, from which, until his fiftieth birthday in December 1929, he could never be sure he would emerge the victor. The role he adopted was that of the plain man who spoke the same practical language as the party workers from the provinces and was accessible to them. Instead of disguising his exercise of power, he personalized it, leaving no doubt as to whose door to knock on. In the same role he represented the voice of common sense and moderation, opposing the exaggeration of the extremists on either side, stressing the need for unity" (Bullock).

If Trotsky, for example, was associated with the idea of "permanent revolution," the notion that "only the victory of the proletariat in the West could protect Russia from bourgeois restoration and assure it the possibility of rounding out the establishment of socialism," Stalin countered with the reassuring idea that the Bolsheviks didn't need to wait for revolution abroad in order to succeed in Russia. After Lenin's demise he posed as a moderate and outmaneuvered Trotsky (who, by the way, had made the elementary mistake of missing Lenin's funeral). By the end of 1924 Stalin had succeeded in branding "Trotskyism" as a heresy. In January 1925 Trotsky lost his command of the army and his face was already being blacked out of Party photographs. Trotsky was expelled from the party in 1926, and exiled from Russia in 1929. Stalin had not yet managed openly to break the taboo against killing fellow Bolsheviks, though he had arranged for Trotsky's unfortunate successor as head of the Red Army, a party hack named Frunze, to die in the course of an operation.

Before his fatal stroke, Lenin had been forced to compromise with the peasantry and to allow them to sell their grain at market prices. This New Economic Policy (NEP) was a retreat from the Bolshevik goal of total state control over the economy, but by 1921 there wasn't much of an economy left to control. NEP was a success, and Stalin attacked Trotsky for opposition to it. But with Trotsky gone, Stalin turned on the supporters of NEP, including the brilliant theorist

Bukharin, and prepared to destroy them as well. The harvest of 1927 was poor: once again the peasants were "hoarding" grain and refusing to accept the government's worthless paper money. In January 1928, with no food in the towns, and no grain to export abroad, Stalin sent 30,000 armed party workers into the countryside to force the peasants to disgorge grain, just as Lenin had done in 1918. And for the first time, referring to "capitalist elements in the countryside," he used the ominous word "liquidate." In the following year he would launch a full-scale expropriation of the peasants under the banner of "collectivization."

Here, after all, was an opportunity to do something that Lenin hadn't been able to do. Lenin had been forced to compromise with the peasants. Stalin would crush them and build "socialism in one country." The revolution of 1917 had been a political miracle; Stalin would astonish the Party and the world by performing an economic one. And in doing so he would outshine Lenin, who had rejected Stalin (in favor of Trotsky!) on his deathbed. The cost of Stalin's drive to assert and to vindicate himself would be reckoned in the millions.

## 6. FASCISM: WHY ITALY?

Like Germany, Italy seemed on the verge of revolution in the aftermath of the First World War. Galloping inflation and unemployment for returning veterans of the war spawned strikes and disorder, as well as a general paranoia among the Italian middle classes, who feared the spread of Bolshevik ideas and methods to their own country.

Again, like Germany, Italy had been unified only in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, between 1860 and 1870. But Italy did not emerge immediately as a Great Power. The country was split between a relatively prosperous north and an impoverished south, and unification only increased the gap. While Germany had vast coal and mineral deposits, these were absent in Italy and all essential raw materials had to be imported. Much of the population was illiterate, and as late as 1882 only 600,000 out of a total population of 25 million were entitled to vote. As if to compensate for its weakness and backwardness, Italy embarked on a pretentious and inglorious program of imperialism in North Africa. An unholy alliance of southern landowner bosses and tariff-minded northern industrialists brokered the deals that corrupted parliamentary politics.

The First World War, far from resolving the country's problems as its leaders had hoped, only exacerbated them. There were no victories in the field, the territorial gains at the expense of Austria probably would have come anyway, and half a million had died. The war had cost a sum about twice as large as all government expenditure between 1861 and 1913 combined. And it had accentuated class divisions: the idea that the poor had died in useless frontal assaults while the rich had stayed at home was widespread. After the war, the government was unable to regain control, as inflation skyrocketed, peasants seized land, and strikes and factory occupations spread in the towns. Nationalists propagandized against the territorial settlement, and a group of them led by the poet D'Annunzio seized the disputed port city of Fiume in 1919.

Benito Mussolini, a journalist and agitator who had broken with the Socialist Party because of its opposition to Italy's entry into the war, founded his Fascist movement in 1919 as well. His program combined radical nationalism with elements of socialism, and attracted the support of discontented veterans and the underemployed. But the movement really began to take off in the fall of 1920 as groups of young Fascists organized action squads and moved into rural areas at night to intimidate and sometimes murder leaders of the socialist farmworkers' movement, often with the complicity of local police and authorities.

Fascism flourished in a period when grievances and fears were rife and the state was too weak and passive to address them effectively. Mussolini claimed that the war had been one of the finest chapters in Italian history, that Italy had been cheated of the gains won by the blood of its sons, and that those who tolerated the Treaty of Versailles and betrayed the heroism of Italy's dead youth must be driven from power. At the same time he appealed to the wealthy landowners and industrialists whose economic interests were threatened by the continuation of strikes and expropriations and who were looking for a leadership that would be more responsive to their plight than the older parties. And finally, D'Annunzio's success had persuaded him that radicalism, even radical nationalism, was not enough: for Fascism to command public attention and enthusiasm, it would have to draw on the resources of drama, myth, and spectacle. In other words, like Hitler, Mussolini understood the importance of the aesthetic dimension of mass politics, the power of rhetoric (although his was mainly empty), and the ability to command the public stage (in his case, usually a balcony from which he made his speeches).

#### 7. THE YOUNG MUSSOLINI: "AN ADVENTURER FOR ALL ROADS"

He was born in 1883 into a peasant family with a tradition of rebellion and imprisonment. His blacksmith father named him after the Mexican revolutionary Benito Juarez. At school the young Mussolini revealed a pronounced sense of vendetta: in later years he used to smile with pleasure at the thought that his schoolfellows would still carry the scars of the wounds he had inflicted on them. He was expelled from a Catholic seminary for stabbing a fellow pupil. Nevertheless he received enough education to become a village schoolmaster. In 1902 he was fired from this job because of his inability to keep discipline in the classroom and for a liaison with a woman whose husband was away on military service. "I accustomed her to my exclusive and tyrannical love: she obeyed me blindly, and let me dispose of her as I wished." Such was the young Mussolini's view of the ideal relationship!

By 1903 he had fled to Switzerland to avoid the draft and his debts. He read Nietzsche, Sorel, and Pareto—all of them notable for their elitist theories of power. He proclaimed himself an atheist and an "authoritarian communist" and several times tried to shock an audience by calling on God to strike him dead. He turned to journalism to support himself and to broadcast his views, and learned that extreme and sensational positions sold papers. In 1904 he returned to Italy and became a leading socialist journalist; in 1911 he was jailed for condemning Italian imperialism in Libya. But in 1914 he veered from ardent

neutralism to ardent interventionism, and broke with his socialist comrades. He fought in the war and was slightly wounded. He understood that when the soldiers returned they would have grievances that he could exploit to cut across existing allegiances and create a new balance of political forces.

He adopted an odd mix of nationalist and revolutionary slogans. He guessed that the returning soldiers would be bitter against those who had taken their jobs and would be attracted to a leader who denounced the stay-at-homes and the antiwar socialist party. He also knew that those who, as officers, had become accustomed to good pay and positions of command might be open to subversion when confronted by the harsh realities of peacetime. He would grasp opportunities as they offered themselves, ride the crest of the wave produced by postwar instability, appeal to discontent and ambition wherever they might be found. His trick was to use anti-capitalist slogans to mobilize the veterans and the unemployed, antisocialist ones to reassure the rich and win financial support for his newspaper and party.

The elections of 1919 were a shut-out for the Fascists, but fortunately for Mussolini the new parliament was more unmanageable than ever, and Socialists were the largest party, alarming the conservatives and encouraging some of them to purchase the support of the Fascist squads. At the end of 1920 the lira was worth only 3.5 American cents as opposed to 19 before the war. As factory occupations and land seizures spread, many in the middle classes feared that Italy was on the brink of a red revolution, and they suspected that the state was too impotent to stop it. The Fascists were emboldened to attack agrarian cooperatives, trade union and socialist party offices, left-wing printing presses and newspapers. Their "action squads" were formed mainly from ex-servicemen, but they constantly recruited students and drop-outs as well. The squads coordinated their actions by telephone, and they often had the support of the local authorities and police, who would search the trade union headquarters for arms, then give the go-ahead to the Fascist squads to smash them.

Fascism had its first successes in the northern part of Italy, starting in the recently acquired port city of Trieste and moving inland to Bologna, the Po Valley, and the hinterland of Venice. One of the most brutal and dangerous of the early recruits was Italo Balbo of Ferrara, who became head of the Fascist militia and, like Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's time, left a trail of devastation in central Italy. Balbo's presence in the movement differentiated Fascism from Nazism and Bolshevism: that is, whereas Hitler was the worst of the Nazis (although he had some competition), and Stalin was the worst of the Bolsheviks, Mussolini was not the most brutal of the Fascists. Paradoxically, that fact worked to his benefit: it made the authorities all the more eager to negotiate a deal with him.

During the elections of May 1921 perhaps as many as a hundred people were killed, and the atmosphere of officially tolerated intimidation influenced the results significantly. Mussolini won his own parliamentary seat, which gave him valuable freedom from arrest. Now the leader of a parliamentary group, he attempted to steer a more moderate course, but the Fascist radicals rebelled. The government hoped to tame the Fascists by bringing them into the parliamentary

arena, but the Fascists responded by brandishing guns in the chamber and threatening socialist deputies with violence. The use of violence had bewildered and demoralized their opponents and destroyed their organizations, and it subverted a state that was already very weak and divided: the parliamentarians could not agree to form a strong government under their leader Giolitti, because the Vatican prevented the Catholic parties (the moderate Right) from cooperating with the moderate Left. Mussolini, now thirty-eight years old, had succeeded in brutalizing Italian politics, and he began to think of using the same techniques of violence and intimidation that had destroyed the Socialists to seize power from the Liberals.

#### 8. THE MARCH ON ROME

The "march on Rome" in October 1922 was a successful bluff. Mussolini threatened to take over the capital with a Fascist militia of thugs in black shirts. The army could have repulsed them easily, but instead the King invited Mussolini to form a government. The King, a timid man, was temperamentally drawn to anyone who would take firm decisions and control domestic unrest. And he thought that Mussolini would stand up for Italian imperial interests better than the Liberal Prime Minister Orlando had done at Versailles. In any case, Mussolini's Fascist squads did not arrive in Rome until twenty-four hours after he had been asked to form a government and only after the army had orders to let them through. The Socialists, who had been defeated in a feeble general strike in August, remained passive. Whereas in Germany, a strike checked the right-wing Kapp Putsch, in Italy the railwaymen made no difficulty about driving Mussolini's train to Rome.

The March on Rome was little more than a comfortable train ride, followed by a petty demonstration. But it catapulted Mussolini into office. It succeeded not because the Fascists were especially strong but because the state was weak. Without collusion from the army, the police, the government, and the King himself, Mussolini's gamble could not have succeeded. The old regime was too weak and discredited to find any spirited defenders. Many people undoubtedly hoped that the responsibilities of power and office would diminish the violence and radicalism of the Fascists, and that they would become respectable. It was the same mistake that German politicians would make about Hitler and the National Socialists. Hardly anyone recognized that Fascism represented a dangerous mutation in European politics, that it would continue to develop its own dynamism, and that it would eventually sweep away the old order.

Mussolini's supporters, as we have seen, included discontented soldiers and youth for whom Fascism often meant a uniform and a job. Many peasants and small farmers had a permanent grudge against the Liberals who in sixty years of power had done so little for their welfare. There were landowners and factory owners who wanted strikes broken, shopkeepers who wanted an end to competition from socialist cooperatives, middle class people whose incomes were depreciating from inflation, nationalists humiliated by the war, Catholics who feared red atheism. Fascism appealed across class lines to anyone with a grievance or a grudge; it played on a mixture of fear, nostalgia for a glorious past, and hope for a dynamic future.

"How could such a mountebank gain power in a civilized country? By force: the Fascist seizure of power was a pseudo-constitutional coup d'état, in which the threat or promise of violence was used to attract support and cow opposition. By chicanery: Mussolini simultaneously intrigued with the respectable political parties and plotted their downfall. By theatricality: Fascism introduced a note of melodrama into political rhetoric and a thrilling excitement, akin to the blood lust of the hunt, into the political activity of its early adherents. By the abject submission of the political class: the left spouted revolutionary rhetoric but crumpled in the face of a real insurrection; the respectable right initially went along with Mussolini's brutal methods, thinking that he would restore order and then enable them to assume power" (Bernard Wasserstein).

## 9. MUSSOLINI IN POWER

When Mussolini catapulted himself into power, Italy, on the brink of civil war, had appalling poverty, the highest birth rate in Europe, one of the highest inflation rates, a weak and corrupt parliament, an unloved monarchy, a Church that regularly denounced the state from the pulpit, and failing public services. Most of Mussolini's promises and projects were nebulous, but he did improve the train, postal, and telephone services and undertake big public works programs.

It took a number of years for Mussolini to convert his regime into a dictatorship: Hitler, as we'll see, required only a few months. In 1924 Parliament changed the election law to get rid of coalition governments. Late in the year Mussolini's thugs murdered a Socialist deputy, Matteotti; Mussolini survived the crisis—it nearly brought him down—and emerged stronger than ever. In 1926 he dissolved other political parties, and soon he got the right to initiate all legislation and all important appointments. Parallel organization of the Party and the government made the regime the indispensable source of patronage. For every government institution there existed a corresponding party organization. When all other political parties were outlawed, citizens had to look to the Fascists for political favors.

Fascism promised to transcend the class struggle by developing a new "corporatism": a planned economy that preserved private ownership of capital and offered compulsory government arbitration of labor disputes. (Workers lost their most powerful weapon: the right to strike.) Instead of increased productivity, however, the economy suffered from more bureaucracy and corruption. Mussolini pumped up the lira to please his middle class supporters, and the results in 1927 were recession, unemployment, and a 20% wage reduction. He declared innumerable "battles" to mobilize public opinion, and aimed to transform the nation into a "monolith," a "block of granite." He undertook elaborate public works and transportation schemes, built impressive-looking armed forces, and proclaimed economic autarky (while becoming increasingly dependent on Germany for fuel and markets). Mussolini also established his own political police on the model of the Cheka: the CONRA (the letters were meaningless). Many of these achievements were empty, but the

bombastic rhetoric and the impression of dynamism and stern political will were essential to Mussolini's mystique.

He presented himself to his people as a man of inflexible resolution, a hardened soldier, a devoted public servant who labored day and night for his people, a man of strong passions but ascetic discipline, a political genius whose predictions had uncanny accuracy. As the great historian A.J.P. Taylor observed, he liked to think of himself as a man on a pedestal, never letting his face show any emotion except for two standard poses of fierceness and benevolence, pout and smirk. Historians, one contemporary wrote, were not just second nature to him; they were his real nature. He had learned the effectiveness of alternating menace and conciliation, and knew the value of violent effects and contrasts. He loved to project an aura of physical vigor, though he was troubled by ulcers, indigestion, and venereal disease. He liked to be seen as a great planner, but also as incalculable, inscrutable, always taking others by surprise. He was anxious to appear as the man of strong will and sudden decisions.

Fascism advertised itself with massive rallies, national festivals, and demonstrations of state power, staged with operatic theatricality. Fascist militarism combined the glamour of new technology with the promise of escape from the drab confines of bourgeois morality into a colorful and heroic world in which violence was legitimized. Unlike Bolshevism, Fascism did not overturn the class hierarchy or threaten private capital. But it too featured legally unrestrained government, a single mass party, pseudo-elections, systematic terror, the state monopoly of communications, the manipulation of enthusiasm by propaganda, a centrally directed industrial economy, and charismatic leadership. And it was Mussolini who invented and popularized the word "totalitarianism."

Fascism is a slippery word, very difficult to define. Perhaps the best definition comes from the historian Robert Paxton: "Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion."

It is important to remember that Mussolini's Fascism was a beneficiary of the Bolshevism of Lenin and Stalin. The Leninist vanguard party, elitist and ruthless, was at once a model for Mussolini, and a threat to the Italian middle classes—a threat that Mussolini offered to remove by unleashing his Fascist squads against the Italian labor movement and the political parties of the Left. We will, of course, observe the same pattern in Germany, with the rise of Hitler and the Nazis.